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Maintaining Community from a Social Safe Distance

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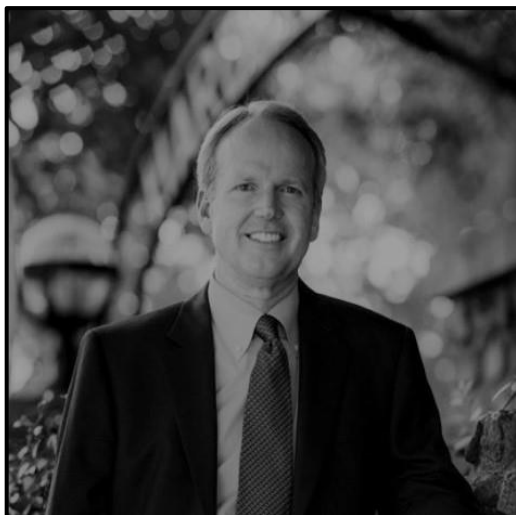
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Dr. Bruce McLarty became the President of Harding University June 1, 2013. He has a DM from Ashland University, served as the Vice President for Spiritual Life for 8 years, and is the author of two books and numerous articles.

MAINTAINING COMMUNITY FROM A SOCIAL SAFE DISTANCE

By Dr. Bruce McLarty

It all happened so fast! When we left for spring break on March 6, I had absolutely no idea that we would be contacting everyone on March 12, instructing students not to return to campus and informing them that we would continue the spring semester online. Even at that point, we did not know that we would end up announcing on March 19 that we would not return to campus for the remainder of the semester. This meant that Spring Sing would be postponed for a full year and that intercollegiate sports were finished for the semester. “It breaks our hearts. This is not what we wanted to do.” Those were the words I used to announce in a video the disappointing news. In less than two weeks, the second half of the spring semester at Harding University went from the momentary pause for spring break to a shocking separation for the remainder of the term. “Social distancing” took on a whole new meaning for the Harding University Community of Mission.

So, how does a community continue to be a community when so many of the things we depend on to create that community are suddenly taken away? Daily chapel, chicken biscuits in the student center, Spring Sing practice, dorm life, Ms. Norma in the Caf, senior projects, presentations and term papers, and even things we so easily took for granted like coffee with a friend or just a simple face-to-face conversation – the absence of these things abruptly challenged our sense of being part of something together.

For me, the emotional turmoil of sending everyone home for the remainder of the semester reminded me of something I had reflected on in my own family. Ann and I have a 20-month-old granddaughter who lives in Montana. Ever since her birth, we have had a new tradition in our family. At Maggie’s bedtime each night, we Facetime with her. Our daughter, Charity, holds the camera so we can see Maggie in her pajamas, holding a sippy cup and ready to go to sleep. Then, Ann, who

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has a beautiful alto voice, sings her version of Brahm's Lullaby to our granddaughter. It is a precious moment, and I am blessed and honored to witness it each night.

On the first Sunday that the College Church streamed their virtual service on Facebook and then later that week when I spoke to the Harding community on Instagram, I shared how our bedtime tradition with Maggie reminded me of being a social distance church or university community in the time of COVID-19. I shared that the two key words in my heart in both situations were *thankfulness* and *longing*. Whether it is seeing Maggie on Facetime, experiencing church from Facebook, or continuing a semester on Canvas and Zoom, I am so thankful to live in a time when distance doesn't mean that we cannot see each other when we are apart. Our semester at Harding continued, students did not lose the credit for those first eight weeks of work they had already done, and we were able to continue seeing the faces and hearing the voices of our classmates. For all of that, we are thankful.

The second word, though, is *longing*. Seeing Maggie on Facetime or sitting in a Zoom class is a far cry from being with someone close enough to reach out and touch them. Ann and I always long to hold Maggie at bedtime, not just to see her on the screen of our iPhones. Zoom meetings with the Cabinet are a wonderful opportunity to meet without sharing our germs, but they leave me longing for the simple efficiency of sitting at a table together and having an in-person discussion. Social distancing with technology leaves us thankful, but also longing.

On this last point, I have observed a fascinating generational difference. Many people who are my age look at this strange semester and wonder if it might result in a major decline in the interest of 18-year-olds to go away to college. After all, now that everyone has experienced education online, why would people travel hundreds or thousands of miles to live in a dorm, eat in a cafeteria and get dressed to go to classes? However, when I mention that concern to the college students I see on Zoom as I visit or guest lecture in their classes, I can see in their eyes

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that they are responding in exactly the opposite way. They *long* to be with their friends and to experience once again the sense of community that they tasted in the days before COVID-19. Their experience of the social distancing semester of spring 2020 has made them more determined than ever before to return. They *long* to be back at Harding.

As we are now in the middle of this experience, not knowing if, when, or for how long we will be ordered by our governor to “shelter at home,” we are all doing the best we can to stay connected while being responsible about social distancing. As Keith Cronk, Harding University’s CIO, frequently reminds all of us, “Harding University continues to be very much open – at a distance!” We don’t know what lies ahead, and we are doing the best we can with the information that we have at hand today. So, we continue teaching and attending classes, balancing budgets, paying employees and helping students progress toward graduation. It is a strange time, and there will certainly be new challenges to face tomorrow that we have not even imagined today. Yet, we are proving that we can continue to build and experience community even in these trying circumstances. With both thankfulness and longing, we greet each new day and the challenges that it brings for maintaining our treasured community from a safe social distance.